

Press Cuttings
Bend It Like Beckham
Watsonstage
25 June 2015

WHAT'S ON STAGE

Bend It Like Beckham (Phoenix Theatre)

Gurinder Chadha brings her 2002 football film to the stage

Michael Coveney • London, West End • 24 Jun 2015

WOS Rating: 4 stars

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"Anyone can cook aloo gobi, but who can bend a ball like Beckham?" Indeed. You could as easily invert the question and ask, "Anyone can carve a cover drive like Sachin Tendulkar, but who can cook aloo gobi like Jamie Oliver?"

The musical version of Gurinder Chadha's delightful 2002 movie sticks with the original question, not surprisingly, as she herself has written (with Paul Mayeda Berges) and directed the show, with a vibrant, lyrical, irresistible set of songs by Howard Goodall (music) and Charles Hart (lyrics).

No updates are required, even though women's football has progressed in racially integrated leaps, bounds and headers over the past ten years; the English team plays in the World Cup quarter-finals this very weekend.

So, Jess Bhamra (Natalie Dew) still has a shrine to Becks in her Southall bedroom while tomboy Jules (Lauren Samuels, convincingly athletic, has far more vim and edginess about her than did Keira Knightley on screen) manipulates her new protégée into the Hounslow Harriers.

The team still trains and plays at non-league Yeading FC. In reality, that club is now merged with Hayes and, ironically, played two huge FA Cup games (against Newcastle United and Nottingham Forest) soon after the film was made; how might those games have altered Chadha's plot?

No worries: the feisty blond stick-thin coach (Jamie Campbell Bower) puts the girls through some brilliant dance footie (tap on studs, anyone?) routines. These are staged by Aletta Collins (who did a good job, too, on *Made in Dagenham*) on curvilinear designs by Miriam Buether which reinforce the feel-good factor in the colourful Southall market, the fairy-lit grotto of the Bhamra household in preparation for Pinky's wedding, the sports field, the city lights of Hamburg and the airport finale.

The somewhat cosy culture clash between the Punjabi Sikhs and the white Brits gains another dimension in Goodall's music, which decorates the lyrical and ensemble numbers with Asian musical curlicues and goes for flat-out Bollywood exuberance in the social choruses, cleverly combining plot and the skilful boomerang shot - as the ball flies round the auditorium - in "First Touch" and "Bend It".



Hart's lyrics are literate, witty and sly, sometimes too over-dense for complete audibility, but very good at conveying honest emotion, as in Sophie-Louise Dann's lament for losing her daughter Jess to the game (and its "butchness"); her fears are conventional ones about sexuality whereas the Bhamras' have more to do with status and respectability.

There's a different "real" lady footballer on stage each night, the excitable voice of BBC legend John Motson on the commentary, a hilarious little troupe of Sikh neighbours and relatives, and a brilliant Beckham lookalike stalking Jess's dreams and walking through the airport like royalty at the end, a sullen po-faced Posh on his arm.

Above all, the show has charm - to complain of a soft centre would be to forswear strawberry creams; ie, stupid. I also enjoyed the elegant, sexy Pinky of Preeya Kalidas(star of *Bombay Dreams*) - if Preeya's Pinky, Natalie's definitely perky - the snake-hipped glide and fancy footwork of Jamal Andréas as Jess's "closeted" ball buddy, and the girls' not-too-down-on-them turbaned dad of Tony Jayawardena, a natural comic actor of the first rank.

Bend It Like Beckham is currently booking until 24 October 2015